

# Mind-reading and character in Greek tragedy

Felix Budelmann

Not to be outdone by James Warren (p. 13), Felix Budelmann uses smarties to help us understand how we relate to the characters of Greek Tragedy. Talking about 'character' or about 'characterization' is often difficult. But with Felix as our guide, it becomes as easy as taking candy from a baby.

The following is a test psychologists regularly use in their work with young children. I have a smartie and two cups, a red and a blue one. I cover the smartie with the red cup. As I do that I am observed both by the child in question – call her Katie – and somebody else, Mark. Mark is sent out of the room, and I then move the smartie from the red to the blue cup, with Katie looking on. Mark comes back in, and I say to Katie: 'If we ask Mark where the smartie is, what will he say: under the red or the blue cup?'

The correct answer is of course 'red', but the point of the test is that it takes a certain kind of mental agility to get it right and not to say 'blue' on the grounds that the smartie is in fact under the blue cup now. Katie has to be able to imagine what goes on in Mark's mind rather than simply answer from her own perspective. This skill is called (somewhat unhelpfully) 'theory of mind': not a theory in the normal sense, but the capacity to imagine what goes on in other people's minds, to 'mentalize' as it is sometimes called, or to 'mind-read'. The test is designed to establish whether Katie has this capacity, and most children pass it around the age of four.

Theory of mind is a large area of research in psychology. It is a capacity that tends to be under-developed in children with autism-related disorders, and it is sometimes thought to be one of the things that distinguish humans from primates. Theory of mind is evidently central to our everyday lives in that we constantly form conscious or unconscious impressions of what other people think or feel as we interact with them. But what is it to do with Greek tragedy?

The answer is that it can help us pick our way through some thorny problems when we try to talk about character. Greek tragedy is known for its highly memorable characters: Clytemnestra, Hippolytus, Antigone, and Medea all have a track

record of engrossing readers and audiences. That's not to say they are simple of course – the major characters in Greek tragedy tend to stir up ambivalent responses – but they all are engaging, and even though extraordinary they seem somehow real. It is easy enough to find oneself mentally playing with reasons for why it might be that Hippolytus is so hostile to women, or arguing over what sort of mother it takes to kill her own children.

## Walking on eggshells

And yet for literary scholars to talk about character is often to walk on eggshells, for a number of reasons, of which I shall single out two. One is to do with the sparseness of how Greek tragedy creates characters. Composed long before Freud introduced the subconscious into common parlance, these plays often fail to tell us all we would like to know about what makes a character tick. We have Hippolytus' outburst about women and we learn a great deal about his pursuits and the company he keeps, about his parentage, as well as his responses to Phaedra, the Nurse, and Theseus, but Euripides does not 'put him on the couch' to give us a full account of his formative experiences or subconscious motivations. Much as we may think about it, we don't *really* know why he thinks about women the way he does.

Aeschylus' way of doing character is even more pared down, so much so that it once prompted a debate over whether he is interested in character at all, or whether he simply made his characters do whatever he needed them to do for the plot to move on, without regard to psychological plausibility. Notoriously, we don't know why Agamemnon ignores his misgivings and steps on the tapestries Clytemnestra spreads out before him – or rather, we can speculate and come up with a whole host

of potential reasons, some with more textual support than others, but none of them made explicit by Aeschylus: is it the mark of an arrogant and overbearing disposition? Does he have something of the Eastern potentate about him (as the Greeks saw them)? Is he just tired? Is he under Clytemnestra's sway? Is he (a suggestion made in Eduard Fraenkel's great *Agamemnon* commentary and much mocked since) a gentleman who won't refuse a lady? Or, to come back to that debate I just mentioned, did Aeschylus just not care and was concerned only with getting Agamemnon into the house, where he had to be to get killed?

The second problem scholars have with character is that Antigone, Hippolytus, and Agamemnon do not in fact exist. They are words on the page, and thinking about them as though they had an existence beyond those words on the page is in a sense wrong. On this line of thinking it is simply pointless to think about reasons for Hippolytus' attitudes to women or about Agamemnon's motivation in stepping on the carpet, as there is no Hippolytus and no Agamemnon. All there is is the dramatic text, and what the text doesn't tell us isn't there.

## Fleshing out the cast of characters

There is then a paradox. On the one hand, readers and audiences find themselves responding intuitively and strongly to the characters of Greek tragedy; on the other hand scholarship points out serious problems with the notion of literary character. Here we come back to 'theory of mind'. Thinking about character in terms of the deeply seated human instinct to make inferences about other people's minds makes us realize that speculating about Hippolytus' or Agamemnon's motivations is exactly what our minds are designed to do. Just as in everyday life we use whatever cues we get – words, facial expressions, body language, past behaviour – to form an impression of what goes on inside somebody's head, so Greek tragedies too, in their own way, present us with a limited number of cues that stimulate our mind-reading skills, through the words of the text, and in performance also through the

actors' voices and expressive bodies.

In other words, there is no problem with all those gaps in our knowledge about tragic characters, nor with the fact that these people don't really exist: we are programmed to develop images of people's minds from whatever evidence we have. Sometimes we know a lot about somebody else, sometimes we know next to nothing; either way we never have *complete* knowledge of what somebody else is thinking or feeling right now – and yet we form vivid impressions of them. Unlike the psychoanalyst, who has the luxury of being able to put people on the couch and interview them at leisure about their emotions, their past, their dreams, in most everyday interactions we have to make do with very little and ever-shifting information. Watching a Greek tragedy, just like those real-life interactions, activates our instinct to turn sparse cues into fully-fledged people.

The kinds of cues Greek tragedy uses to fire up the audience's theory of mind apparatus are manifold. I want to end not by cataloguing them (though that would be an interesting task, which would get us into *characterization*), but by thinking briefly about a specific set of character issues that derive from the fact that drama is a medium in which the audience observes not so much one character at a time as multiple characters interacting with one another. The real-life equivalent of much drama is not me talking with you, but me watching you talk with somebody else. As a result, the audience doesn't just mind-read characters (what does Phaedra think?), but it also watches characters mind-read each other (the chorus and the Nurse trying to work out what Phaedra thinks).

This extra level opens up interesting possibilities for employing the audience's mind-reading skills. Most fundamentally, it allows the playwright to embed in his plays signals to alert the audience that this is a moment where careful mentalizing is required. Near the beginning of *Hippolytus* Euripides has his characters wonder at some length about Phaedra's state of mind. The chorus sing a whole ode speculating about her illness; the Nurse presses her to explain herself; and then the chorus and Nurse discuss the matter between them. Many other plays contain comparable moments. Again and again Greek tragedy makes characters speculate about other characters' states of mind, and thus provides a prompt for the audience to do the same.

What is more, a bit like the smartie test, such scenes often turn on differences in knowledge. In the many scenes of recognition and scenes of deception, for instance, one character knows more than another, and the audience finds itself mentalizing how character A mentalises character B, and how character A's

mentalizing goes wrong. When Clytemnestra provides an apparently friendly welcome to Agamemnon, the audience knows that she is being deceitful and is planning to kill him, and hence will be thinking not just separately about Agamemnon's state of mind and about Clytemnestra's state of mind, but also about what Agamemnon thinks Clytemnestra is thinking, and how wrong he is, and probably also about what the chorus are thinking about Agamemnon's and Clytemnestra's thinking.

Psychologists call this phenomenon 'higher-order' theory of mind, and investigate how many orders of mentalizing humans can process without getting lost. I *think* that you *assume* she is *imagining* what he is *experiencing*... Greek tragedy's penchant for recognitions and deceptions makes it a genre that engages its audience regularly in such higher-order mentalizing, sometimes with considerable complexity – and so makes it a genre that doesn't just routinely activate our theory of mind apparatus but at times positively titillates it.

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